

## **GROUP CHAIRMAN'S INTRODUCTORY REMARKS**

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The topic for this afternoon's session is "Comparative Religious Responses to Modernization." I didn't formulate that topic, but when I was asked if I was willing to chair a session and really given little choice among topics, I gladly accepted this one since the title was stimulating and interesting. I have had some latitude as chairman of the session to decide on which religions to focus. I am responsible for having singled out Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism, and for not having invited speakers from the United States of America. It is one of the great opportunities of such a conference for people in the United States to hear people from elsewhere and also to hear from experts about religions that are less close to home than Christianity and Judaism.

The overall topic at this conference is "The Search for Absolute Values in a Changing World." The relation of our topic to the overall topic is fairly obvious. But it may not be amiss for me to use the opening remarks I am supposed to make to say something about that.

The origin of the idea that there are absolute values is to be found in religion—not just in one religion, but in several religions. The examples include Judaism. In the Bible we find what has served for Christian people as a paradigm of absolute values. But as we are about to hear, in a different way we also find absolute values in Hinduism.

In philosophy the two main paradigms of belief in absolute values are two philosophers who are widely considered among the greatest who ever lived—Plato in ancient Greece and Kant in eighteenth-century Germany. Both came from religion and asked themselves to what extent one could retain absolute values without traditional religion. The belief in absolute values did not lead Plato and Kant, any more than the Hindus and the ancient Hebrews, to adopt the same absolute values. Kant and Plato are interesting to compare on slavery and on women. If we compare them on slavery, Kant was more progressive; if we compare them on women, Kant

was less progressive. Since Kant stopped writing around 1800, the search for absolute values has abated. The belief in absolute values has been eroded. Some people would call that part of modernization, and many people have mixed feelings about modernization.

But since the end of World War II many intellectuals are wondering whether we don't need absolute values after all. It may be useful to distinguish three positions. Some intellectuals claim to have absolute values and believe they know what values are absolute. Secondly, there are those who do not think they have absolute values, but who search for absolute values. Finally, some intellectuals believe that absolute values are an impossibility. In the third camp some believe not only that the search for absolute values is doomed because there aren't any and can't be any, but also that the search is undesirable and not what humanity needs. What humanity needs is the recognition of the impossibility of finding absolute values, a recognition of our finitude, and tolerance and mutual respect.

Moreover, absolute values are not necessarily shared values. Moses, for example, believed in absolute values, but he certainly did not think that all people shared his values. Nor are shared values necessarily believed to be absolute.